

VZCZCXRO0834
RR RUEHLMC
DE RUEHAN #0236/01 0681023
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 091023Z MAR 07
FM AMEMBASSY ANTANANARIVO
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 4456
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC
RUEHLMC/MILLENNIUM CHALLENGE CORPORATION

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 ANTANANARIVO 000236

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DEPT FOR AF/EX, AF/E, AF/FO, AND DRL
DEPT PLEASE PASS TO USAID AND PEACE CORPS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [KMCA](#) [KPAO](#) [EAID](#) [PHUM](#) [PINR](#) [AMGT](#) [ASOC](#) [MA](#)
SUBJECT: AMERICAN WEEK IN MAHAJANGA IS A HIT

¶1. SUMMARY: From February 27 - March 1, 40 Mission personnel and numerous partners hosted American Week in Mahajanga, a city on Madagascar's northwestern coast with a sizeable Muslim population. Well over 5,000 local citizens visited our exhibit booths, attended an Embassy-sponsored basketball tournament and cultural performances, and were present for the closing of a USG-sponsored cultural preservation exhibit. As confirmed in press accounts, the impact of American Week "will continue and will remain engraved in the hearts of the people in Mahajanga." END SUMMARY.

What was American Week?

¶2. Mahajanga is a regional center of several hundred thousand citizens, a sizeable minority of them Muslim, on the northwestern coast of Madagascar. As the drive from Antananarivo takes 10 to 14 hours, the citizens of Mahajanga have limited or no understanding of the work of the U.S. Mission. Building on two local events already organized by the Public Affairs Section: the finals of the Second Annual Black History Month HIV/AIDS and Malaria Awareness Basketball Tournament, conducted for high school students in Mahajanga, and the closing of the 2006 Ambassador's Fund for Cultural Preservation project, "Opening the Door on History: Preserving Madagascar's Indo-Arabian Carved Doors," Post took advantage of this week as an excellent opportunity to further educate area citizens about what the U.S. Mission does in Madagascar.

¶3. Monday, February 26: While the Mission was setting up for American Week, Ambassador McGee and USAID Director Patrick spent the day meeting with important local contacts. The Ambassador began the day by donating an x-ray screening machine to the airport upon his arrival. Local leaders and law enforcement welcomed the donation of Mahajanga's first such machine as a significant improvement to the porous security at this international airport. Following this ceremony, the Ambassador visited the local Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) office and met with civic and business leaders in Mahajanga (septel).

¶4. Tuesday, February 27: Ambassador McGee officially opened American Week at La Maison de la Culture with a private tour of the exhibits for VIPs, including the Mayor of Mahajanga, in the morning. This hall hosted 16 booths with exhibits from many Mission elements: the Defense Attache's Office, USAID, the Regional Security Office, the Commercial Section, the Consular Section, the Public Affairs Section, the Millennium Challenge Corporation, and Peace Corps. Numerous USAID and MCC partners also had impressive displays. Commercial enterprises, including Exxon Mobil and a company that manufactures name-brand Polo clothing for export to the U.S. under the African Growth and Opportunities Act (AGOA), also set up booths to showcase U.S. commercial involvement in Madagascar. During the afternoon session open to the public, the week's cultural highlights kicked off with a performance by a local Muslim choir singing American gospel and Muslim songs -- a tribute to religious

tolerance and diversity -- to a packed auditorium.

¶5. Wednesday, February 28: Exhibits continued to run on the 28th. Post was encouraged that the majority of attendees were local students who spent long periods of time at each booth taking notes and listening to Mission personnel describe their roles. Post also used the adjoining auditorium for films and cultural demonstrations, including a live performance by American folk singer Lee-Alison Sibley with the DCM on back-up vocals. Staff members of Population Services International (PSI), a USAID partner, animated the audience throughout all three days, making these educational opportunities very popular with the crowds.

¶6. Wednesday was the highlight of the week, as over 2,000 citizens of Mahajanga packed into the local gymnasium to watch the girls' and boys' final games of the Basketball Tournament. The day ended with a representational dinner co-hosted by Exxon Mobil. (Exxon Mobil used the week to quietly educate the local population about their business as they prepare to explore for oil off the coast of Mahajanga.) The dinner featured classic American show tunes sung by Lee-Alison Sibley that inspired several of the invitees to spontaneously respond with a set of Malagasy songs. Guests included the Mayor of Mahajanga, the French and Comoran Consuls, and other dignitaries.

¶7. Thursday, March 1: About 3,500 people visited the exhibits on the final day of American Week. The morning featured the closing ceremony of the carved Indo-Arab doors exhibit with local cultural entertainment and speeches by the Ambassador, Mayor, and other VIPs. Our internet site, www.antananarivo.usembassy.gov, has posted images of our booths as well as a photo of the closing ceremony of the cultural exhibit. The afternoon ended with a very popular "Quiz Show" testing the audience's knowledge of U.S. history, culture, diversity and involvement in Madagascar and rewarding them with t-shirts manufactured in-country by U.S. companies.

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¶8. Post is extremely pleased with the impact of American Week in Mahajanga. Thousands of Malagasy far from the capital city, many of them students, now have a much better understanding of the role the U.S. Mission and our partners play in this country. As Mission elements educated them about our consular services, opportunities to study in the U.S., and the Ambassador's Self-Help Fund, they also have a better understanding of how the Mission can help them as individuals. The Mission was particularly pleased to develop its relationship with one of the most significant Muslim communities in Madagascar.

¶9. Local media coverage of American Week and related events was extensive, with reporting by eight local radio stations, four local TV stations (including affiliates of national TV and radio stations), and two local correspondents of Antananarivo-based daily newspapers. Citing the number of visitors and the information available on American activities, they called the week a "resounding success." National newspaper "La Tribune" featured a full-page report including color photographs of the many events. Highlighting the strong participation of the Islamic Bohra community, the article concluded that, "the American Week ends but its activities and impact will continue and will remain engraved in the hearts of the people in Mahajanga."

¶10. Post also believes this event helped the Mission community itself come together by working across agencies and across offices to achieve a common goal. We understand now more than ever the different role each section plays and how our efforts are interdependent. We will take this spirit of cooperation forward in our future endeavors.

Future

11. Post thanks the Department for its support of this event. Our connections to this coastal city were greatly enhanced by American Week. We hope to repeat this success in another regional city next year.

MCGEE